

Ky. Streams Fouled Coal Sludge Make a Comeback Fish Populations Recover From Spill

Roger Alford Associated Press
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INEZ, Ky. -- Wildlife experts are finding fish and frogs in the eastern Kentucky streams where all aquatic life was annihilated two years ago by a deluge of smothering coal sludge. Kevin Frey, a biologist with Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, said the return of some fish and other creature indicates the streams have begun healing themselves.

Minnows, darters, suckers and catfish that have been netted in Coldwater and Wolf creeks swam in fr other streams, and, in some instances, actually began reproducing this year, Frey said.

"The streams are slowly rebuilding fish communities, and their diversity will come back with time," he said. An estimated 306 million gallons of sludge broke through the bottom of a 70-acre reservoir on a mount outside Inez on Oct. 11, 2000. The black goo gushed through underground coal mine portals, out into the creeks, then into the Tug Fork of the Big Sandy River.

Lawns were buried up to seven feet deep in the molasses-like mixture. In addition to the killed fish, drinking water supplies were fouled along some 60 miles of the Big Sandy River. The gummy remnants of the sludge cling to the creek banks in some places, and the water still turns blackish after rains.

The Environmental Protection Agency called the spill one of the worst environmental disasters ever in the Southeast.

Inspectors issued citations to Martin County Coal after the spill, charging a variety of violations, including polluting streams, releasing hazardous substances into the environment, creating an environmental emergency and engaging in an unsafe practice.

Martin County Coal, a subsidiary of Massey Energy of Richmond has agreed to pay \$3.25 million in penalties and damages to the Kentucky Cabinet for Natural Resources and Environmental Protection, \$225,000 to the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, and \$110,000 to the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration.

In addition, Massey has said it will spend \$46.5 million on the cleanup, which is largely complete.

At least nine state and federal lawsuits involving more than 430 plaintiffs are pending against Martin County Coal Corp.

Greg Pond, a biologist with the Kentucky Division of Water, said water quality has greatly improved, and riffles that are important in oxygenating the water have begun to form in the stream beds.

"We were actually surprised at the number of species that were in the streams," Pond said. "We sampled several sites in the formally impacted area, and came up with a dozen species."

Pond said he also found dozens of species of aquatic insects in the streams, which means fish have a r

supply of food.

Both Pond and Frey cautioned that the streams are far from pristine. The fish that have returned are of species that are the most tolerant to environmental contamination.

With one dip of a seine recently, Frey and state biologist Todd Wills captured more than two dozen from a pool in Coldwater that had been clogged with sludge two years ago.

Frey said a more extensive examination done in August found nine species of fish in Coldwater Creek. is far fewer than would be found in a healthy stream.

"The diversity is still low, but the species that are in there look like they're starting to reproduce," Frey

"It's definitely healing."

The state plans to restock all the native fish and other aquatic creatures to the streams. Officials said restocking will not take place for at least a year, possibly longer.

Frey said damage to the streams was so severe that he does not know how long it would take for them to recover naturally, without help from state agencies.

"It's just so great a magnitude," he said.

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